

# *Field Report*

## **Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area**

### ■ 1.0 Summary

The Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area (NRRA) was established in 1974 by the Corps of Engineers and transferred to the Department of Interior in 1990. Big South Fork is one of two parks in the NPS system to be doubly designated as a river *and* recreation area. The historical significance of the park is demonstrated through the interpretative activities the park provides at the Blue Heron mining Camp, formerly operated by the Stearns Company, and the Oscar Blevins and John Litton farms. The privately operated Big South Fork Scenic Railway, which brings visitors to the Blue Heron area from the town of Stearns, enhances the park's opportunity to provide a quality historic experience. Figure 1 shows the historic area of the Blue Heron Mining Camp. The park is also well known to local residents as a place where both horseback riding and all-terrain vehicle (ATV) uses are permitted. The south fork of the Cumberland River is a popular destination for watersports, including canoeing and kayaking.

**Figure 1. Blue Heron Mining Camp**



The park has been very active in engaging the local communities during the General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (GMP/EIS) process and expects to produce a circulation draft GMP/EIS in fall 1999. The park continually struggles with its efforts to provide historical interpretation, recreational opportunities while protecting the fragile river resource. The changing image of the park from a local recreation area to a national attraction is difficult for many of the local residents who regularly use the resource.

Opportunities for transit on the park to enhance the visitation and quality of the historical experience are available and could be considered in the next 15 – 20 years. Three concepts for Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) include:

- The enhancement of the Big South Fork Scenic Railway at the north end of the park;
- A shuttle system in the Bandy Creek area with connection to the historic farms in the south portion of the park; and
- A shuttle system to provide one-way return trip to users of the river.

## ■ 2.0 Background Information

### 2.1 Location

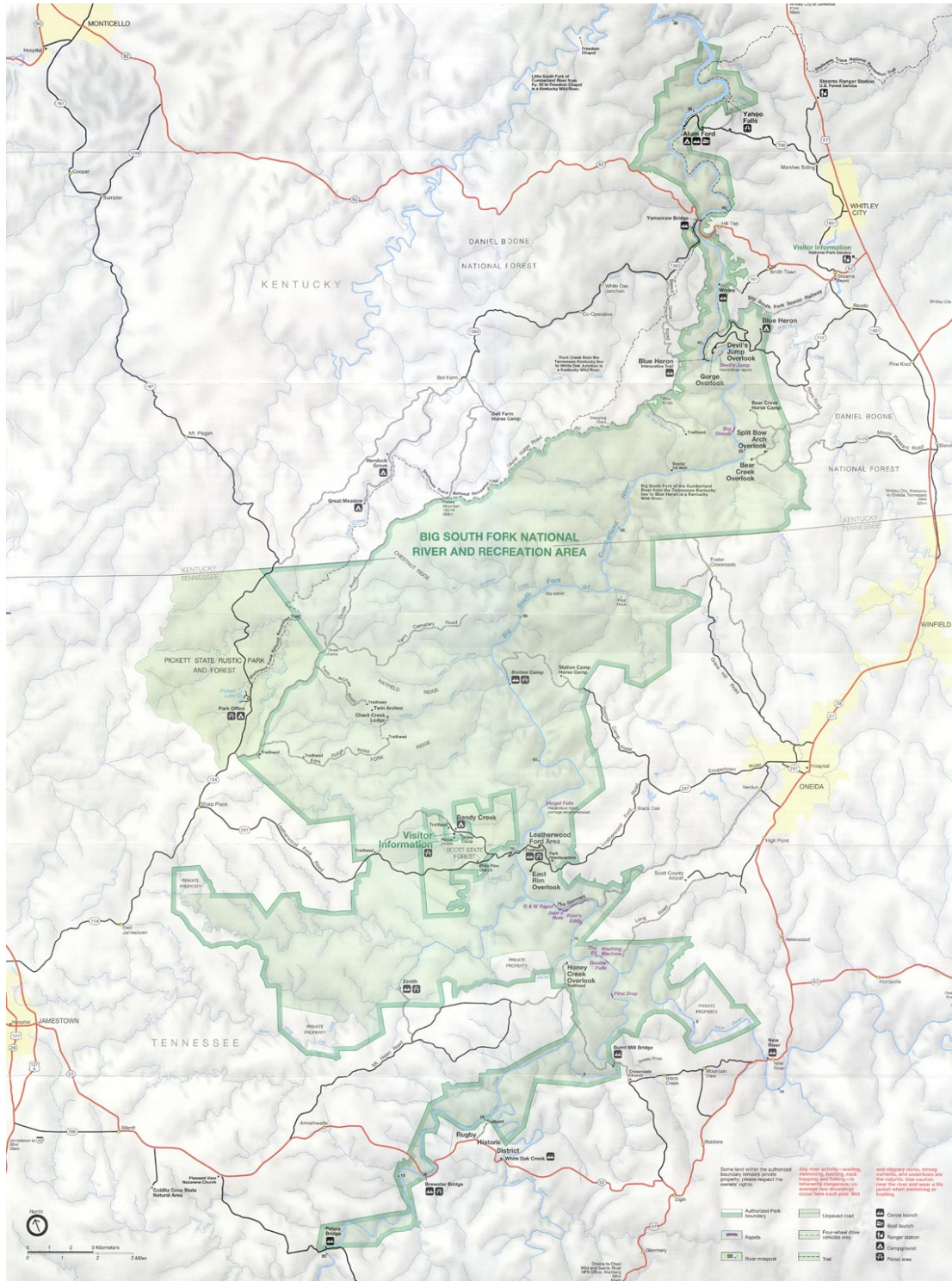
The Big South Fork NRRRA is located in the gorge area of the Cumberland Plateau in southeastern Kentucky and northeastern Tennessee. Big South Fork Headquarters is located in Oneida, Tennessee, northwest of Knoxville. Figure 2 shows the location and major attractions of the Big South Fork NRRRA.

### 2.2 Administration and Classification

Big South Fork NRRRA was established in 1974 with the signing of the Water Resources Development Act. Big South Fork is one of two NRRAs in the NPS. The two main parts of the park include the river gorge and adjacent area or uplands. The gorge area and uplands have regulations for preservation and recreation, with use limitations on uses in the gorge. Motorized vehicles are prohibited in the gorge.

The recreation area is located in the jurisdictions of two states, five counties and 32 utility companies.

**Figure 2. Map of Big South Fork NRRA**



## **2.3 Physical Description**

Although it is authorized to be 125,000 acres, over 105,000 acres of river gorge and adjacent area have been purchased for the Big South Fork NRRA. The park surrounds a number of privately owned tracts and the Scott State Forest.

The two major developed areas of the park are the Bandy Creek Camp and the Blue Heron area.

There are 260 miles of road in the park, 90 percent of which are gravel.

## **2.4 Mission and Goals of the Big South Fork NRRA**

The mission and goals of the Big South Fork NRRA were established through the Water Resources Development Act and the directive of the NPS through the dual designation of the NRRA. The goals of the park include:

- To preserve and interpret the area's various types of resources;
- To preserve the free flowing Big South Fork and portions of its tributaries;
- To preserve the natural integrity of the gorges and valleys; and
- To develop the area's outdoor recreational potential for the public's enjoyment and regional economic benefit.

## **2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile**

The peak seasons for Big South Fork are in the spring and fall colors season. Of the 850,000 to 875,000 annual visitors, the majority of visitors engage in activities such as hiking, river use (kayak, canoe, and rafts) and horseback riding. In the last eight years, the recreation area has become known as a horse park of the NPS and hosts a number of competitive horse rides. Off-road cyclists and ATV users are allowed on designated trails only. Hunting is allowed in the park during regular state hunting seasons.

About half of the horseback riders are from the local area and are day users of the park facilities. Non-local users frequently stay three to five days and use the privately operated horse campgrounds or stable on the park property. Shown in Figure 3, the Bandy Creek area offers group camping, horse stalls, and private camping. Other campsites include the Station and Bear Creek Horse Camps.

The Blue Heron Mining Camp, located in the park, provides a historic interpretive experience of the coal miners employed by the Stearns Coal and Lumber Company in Kentucky. Built in 1937 and abandoned in 1962, the mining camp was restored by the NPS in 1989 with ghost structures and oral history exhibits. Visitors are able to access the camp by automobile or the Big South Fork Scenic Railway open air railcars.

**Figure 3. Bandy Creek Campground and Horse Stables**



The park also offers driving tours of historic farm homes including the Oscar Blevins Farm Loop and the John Litton Farm Loop.

## ■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

### 3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concern

There are 25 – 30 automobile access points into the park and 11 access points through the gorge. Although there are parking areas at the gorge access points, the park does try to limit the number of people near the river. Once inside the park, most visitor hike, bike, or ride horses or ATVs as part of the recreation experience. Although the park experiences some very high visitation, especially on weekends with large, organized groups of horse-back riders, the park does not seem to have difficulty in accommodating the visitors. Parking, though sometimes full, is often adequate. Most capacity problems occur on holiday weekends. Few of the park's roads are paved, including several that provide access to horse camps.

The Big South Fork Scenic Railway is operated by a concessionaire from Stearns, Kentucky to the Blue Heron Mining Camp located in the park. The train operates once daily three to four days a week and twice per day on weekends during the peak summer months and fall colors seasons. The train uses the historic Kentucky and Tennessee Railway and is permitted to operate into the park. The park is supportive of the Big South Fork Scenic Railway and welcomes additional visitors to the Blue Heron area.

### 3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Communities near the park include Knoxville, Jamestown, Oak Ridge, Oneida, Crossville, Byrdstown, and Rugby, Tennessee and Whitley City, Somerset, and Stearns, Kentucky. The area around the park is predominately rural in nature with low to moderate development.

The communities in the area have been very active in the GMP process conducted by the park over the past few years. The communities are generally in favor of development outside of the park. Most of the current development near the park is in Tennessee from Huntsville to Oneida. Jamestown, Tennessee provides good access from Chattanooga in an attempt to gain development and visitors.

### **3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

The two general areas of the park are the gorge and the uplands. The river gorge is relatively fragile and more susceptible to environmental degradation than the upland area. Although more activities take place in the gorge area, the border between the gorge and the uplands is difficult to define.

Although the variety of plant and animal species in the park are innumerable, the most interesting are the 22 to 24 species of mussels located in the river bed, five of which are endangered and several others that are protected at the state level. The mussel populations indicate the health of the river. The natural habitat of the mussels is located on the shoulder areas and crossings of the river; the same places where people want to be. Five of the mussel species in the river are endangered. The majority of the resource damage is caused by the use of ATVs or sport utility vehicle owners that drive in unauthorized areas.

Cultural resources of the park include 12 National Historic Register eligible sites, 56 known cemeteries, the Oscar Blevins and John Litton Farms and the Blue Heron Mining Camp. All sites provide historical interpretation of the Cumberland Valley. The Blue Heron Mining camp is the most visited historical resource and has been enhanced through the efforts of the park service to provide structure to the interpretation activities. The mining camp includes about once dozen ghost structures of homes and mining company buildings that were once located on the site. A museum and interpretive center are located within the modern train depot that connects the Big South Fork Scenic Railway to the park. The Blevins and Litton Farms provide driving tours of farms that were active through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The Blevins Farm is shown in Figure 4.

In addition to historical sites, the Big South Fork basin was once an Indian hunting ground. Indians used rock shelters in the area for transient habitation as they followed local game. Though there are over 3,000 rock shelters in the area, most have been looted by arrowhead hunters. The park does, however, continue to find new archeological sites.

### **3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

The recreation opportunities in the park provide a variety of activities including camping, hiking, horseback riding, bicycle and ATV use, as well as canoeing and kayaking. The camps on the park grounds provide revenue for the park. The park also collects fees for the use of the swimming pool for non-campers.

Three private outfitters are allowed to provide hiking, river and/or horse guides on the park property in addition to at least five concessionaires that operate facilities to or within the park.

**Figure 4. Oscar Blevins Farm**



There is some conflict between uses such as the horse riders, bicyclists and ATV users. The park does designate certain trails for specific uses, although multiple uses are allowed on the some of the trails. The park also provides information about horse-encounter protocol in the park newspaper and encourages different user types to be courteous.

There are very few parks in the NPS system that allow ATV use. All parks that do allow ATVs restrict use to designated areas.

## ■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

### 4.1 Unit Plans

Big South Fork NRRRA has been very active in the creation of the GMP/EIS. The circulation draft on the GMP/EIS is anticipated to be ready in fall 1999.

In addition to the GMP/EIS, the park would like to provide a living history program at the Oscar Blevins Farm if future visitations increase.

## **4.2 Public and Agency Coordination**

Through the GMP/EIS process, Big South Fork has held dozens of public meeting throughout the area. They also coordinate their efforts with the state governments of Tennessee and Kentucky in addition to the five counties in which the park is located.

Local residents would like the park to remain a local attraction, although there is space for the park to increase visitation. In fact, the planning process for the GMP/EIS is new for the local residents and it has been difficult for the local public to realize that the park is, indeed, a national park.

## **■ 5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options**

### **5.1 Magnitude of Need**

The major problems that the park experiences are the mix of recreational uses and the fragility of the river gorge and bed. Although visitation is stable or slightly increasing, the park's effort to become a nationally recognized park (while being considered local residents at local park), will affect future use.

Although there are few transit opportunities for the park today, future plans for the park may result in a need for transit 15 – 20 years from today. The future opportunities should complement the park's efforts to expound upon its historical value and the interpretive displays that reside in the park. Both the Blue Heron Area and the Oscar Blevins Farm Loop provide opportunities to use ATS technologies.

### **5.2 Feasible Transit Alternatives**

- The existing Big South Fork Scenic Railway may provide the park an opportunity to increase visitation to the Blue Heron Mining Camp historic site in addition to providing access to the park without the use of automobiles. A public-private partnership with the Railway could provide additional off-site parking for the park if the railway was able to accommodate recreation equipment and an increase in the number of daily trips into the park.
- Internally to the park, the Oscar Blevins Farm Loop may provide an opportunity for more visitors to get around the park and experience the historical value of the area. A regularly scheduled shuttle or on-demand service could operate in the Bandy Creek area and connect the campground with the Oscar Blevins interpretive area as well as hiking and biking opportunities.
- There is an additional opportunity to provide a one-way shuttle service for river users. The shuttle could provide transportation for canoeing and kayaking trip and would either take river users to the start of their trip, or shuttle them back to their origin at

the end of the trip. A communication or reservation system that would allow the park or concessionaire know when a trip was needed. This service has been provided in the past, but is not currently in operation. Increased use in the river-related activities may perpetuate a greater need in the future.

## ■ 6.0 Bibliography

Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area General Management Plan Newsletters, Nos. 1-6.

Official Visitors Guide to the National Park Service Activities and Events, Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, 1999.

Water Resources Development Act, Public Law 93-251, 93rd Congress, H.R. 10203. March 7, 1974.

## ■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Fred Kelly, Chief of Maintenance

Judy Iburg, Acting Superintendent